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Excessive Reforms Crippling CIA Effectiveness

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The only surprising thing about President Carter's recent dressing-down of the CIA over alleged intelligence failures in Iran was that the rebuke apparently was offered with a straight face. Given the shellacking that the Central Intelligence Agency has sustained over the past five years, it is remarkable that the agency, and particularly its clandestine collection arm, can produce any worthwhile intelligence at all. Reprimands ring somewhat hollow. It's like amputating a man's leg and then berating him because he can no longer play an adequate centerfield.

The CIA controversy has come almost full circle. It began with the excesses of the agency's clandestine service. Then came the furor and the campaign to cleanse the CIA, equally excessive: an effort to carry out major surgery not with a scalpel, but with a sledgehammer. And now the inevitable third phase has begun, the criticism of the CIA for its inability to produce the first-rate intelligence which even some of its harshest critics have understood to be vital to our national well-being.

There is no disputing the fact that the CIA's clandestine service abused the public trust, and that the agency needed to undergo a careful restructuring to ensure against repetition of the abuses. None understood that better than those of us who had been on the inside. But many of the CIA's most vociferous critics seemed to assume that the agency could sustain a ghastly amount of exposure, regulation and abuse without impeding its collection capability — and our national security.

Caught up in the momentum of their own self-serving and self-aggrandizing crusade, they were bound and determined to take the CIA down a peg. And when intelligence professionals pleaded that the reform be carried out judiciously, without laying open the clandestine service to the glare and the fanfare of public investigation, we were lectured to the effect that our protestations were merely a ruse for shielding the CIA, and told to go away.

WHAT THE agency's detractors failed to grasp, and what is apparently still being misunderstood by the Carter Administration, is the plain fact that the clandestine service is not an indestructible machine for grinding out intelligence. A great deal of our intelligence is indeed produced by technical means, and this production has been largely unimpaired by the years of ex-

But machinery has its limits. It can provide valuable information on other machines: warplanes, missiles and submarines. But it cannot, for the most part, report on those weapons still on the drawing board, or on the intentions of small groups of people — be they the politburos of hostile countries, or the leaders of opposition parties in crucial Third World areas, or terrorist cells. Only human sources can provide such information, and it is the process of acquiring intelligence from these human sources that is so incredibly fragile.

Such acquisition, first, requires the development of a cadre of case officers: bright, creative and dedicated intelligence operatives skilled at acquiring such sources. The case officers must then be provided with the cover to allow them to work overseas in relative security and give them entree to potential sources. They must be encouraged to undertake the recruitment of worthwhile sources, even in the face of the ever-present risk that an approach will fail, with embarrassing political consequences. And, above all, they must be able to assure their sources beyond a reasonable doubt that they can protect both their identities and the information they produce from public exposure.

We still have some bright and dedicated people in the CIA who are producing a remarkable amount of good intelligence from human sources, but they are fighting a losing battle. Their ranks have been badly depleted, principally by early retirements encouraged by an administration anxious to shrink the size of the agency posthaste. And since the decision has been taken to trim the clandestine service by attrition, there has been virtually no room for new blood. So today's cadre of case officers is an aging group, persons over 40 engaged in what we used to think of as a young man's game.

And the survivors live in a tangled web of regulations, in which virtually every contact has to be painstakingly justified and many are arbitrarily excluded. Their cover is second-rate to non-existent despite stepped-up efforts by the Soviets and the Cubans and their propaganda instrumentalities throughout the world to expose them as CIA officers. And far from being pressed to accept the challenge of source acquisition, they are all too often discouraged from doing so by political masters unwilling to chance the fallout from an unsuccessful operation.

And most of all they suffer from a severe credibility problem. While their ability to protect source identities is still remarkably good, potential sources, aware of the publication of great mounds of sensitive information by both outsiders and ex-agency insiders, are understandably reluctant to place their personal security in the CIA's hands.

UNDER these conditions it is not surprising that the case officer cadre, which once possessed a most remarkable esprit, now suffers from galloping despondency. If there were ever a circle of forgotten men in the American government, these are the men.

I am sorry for them, but I am sorrier still for the society they serve, the society that even now is only on the brink of recognizing its need for their service, and that is still a long way from addressing itself to the problem of making them operational again.

We are a good and well-meaning country, but imbued with a monumental naivete that is our undoing. We are doomed to learn again and again that for all our puffing and posturing about standards of international morality and the immorality of interference in the affairs of other countries, it's a damned

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